



Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee Public Hearing

Rachel Rubin, Executive Secretary to the Board of Trustees

February 16, 2023

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony on behalf of The University of Connecticut regarding ***HB 6355 AN ACT INCREASING THE NUMBER OF STUDENT MEMBERS ON THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT.***

Pursuant to Connecticut General Statutes, Section 10a-103, there are already two voting student members sitting on the 21-person Board of Trustees at UConn (the Board) - one undergraduate and one graduate student. Their respective student body elects each.

Of the 53 public flagship universities across the country, only one includes more than two voting student members. Five, including UConn, have two; 23 have one, and 24 have no voting student members. The presence of students on governing boards reflects the value placed on student voices by these institutions, including UConn. However, the fact that no institution includes more than two voting student members also reflects the importance of having experienced leadership on university governing boards, which are typically composed of individuals who have significant, long-term experience in the private, public, and/or non-profit sectors and can bring that to bear as they oversee the governance of highly complex modern research institutions.

As you know, governing boards for universities are not composed based on the demographics of campuses, or to represent specific campus populations. Rather, they typically include individuals external to the university – meaning neither employees nor students – which allows them to apply independent, unbiased judgement when making decisions. Related, no trustee is on the board to represent any single “constituency,” including students. The role of every trustee is to act in the best interests of the university as a whole.

At 21 members, the UConn board is already among the largest in the nation. Enacting changes to the statutes related to the university’s long-standing, well-functioning governance structure would also create a precedent that threatens basic good governance going forward. This is because it invites others to seek to add even more trustees through the legislative process in the future for reasons not contemplated today. This legislation could be cited as justification for doing so. A board that is too large and potentially populated by additional trustees placed there to represent specific constituencies is a recipe for dysfunction and poor governance.

Students and their representative groups have ample opportunities for their voices to be heard through the existing student trustees, the trustee committee process, and of course, like the public at large, are also able to address the board directly during the public comment portion of board meetings, which occur at the outset of each board meeting.

As part of a compromise, the University and the Undergraduate Student Government (USG) agreed to permanently assign the undergraduate student trustee to the board’s Committee on Financial Affairs and allow USG to name two additional undergraduate student members to the board’s Committee on Student Life. The Board approved a bylaw change in 2017 reflecting this compromise.

If a bill such as the one before you today were to pass, it would be contrary to the compromise reached between the University and USG. And these committees would return to their previous structures.